

## *Highlights of Employee, Partner and Landowner Comments*

In the spring of 2012, NRCS took a bold step to plan for the agency's future based on projected impacts of environmental challenges, customer needs, budget constraints, and new technology. Chief Dave White issued the call to action during a national video conference with NRCS State Conservationists and partners, asking each state to develop a plan for structuring the field office of the future to deliver efficient and effective services over the next three to five years.

In Virginia, NRCS sought input from a broad cross section of individuals using a variety of methods. NRCS employees, soil and water conservation districts and state partners provided comments through an online questionnaire while landowners sent their responses through the mail. NRCS and district employees, members of the State Technical Committee, and Soil and Water Conservation Districts leaders provided their input during facilitated discussions at regional and state meetings. Virginia Farm Bureau also hosted three facilitated meetings for farmers. In addition to comments from the various sessions, NRCS received 323 responses from individuals.

Here are the top responses from landowners, partners and employees.

*The most important service that NRCS provides is technical assistance.* Environmental regulations and the complexity of modern agriculture have led to a need for high quality, reliable technical assistance. Landowners need a locally trained and highly qualified person (regardless of the agency) who has a high level of decision making authority and is:

- Equipped with appropriate technology and equipment
- Knowledgeable about agriculture and government programs
- Accessible and able to build a relationship of trust with clients
- Networked with other technical experts

*The top three resource concerns are:* water quality, soil quality degradation and soil erosion.

*Need to reduce paperwork and bureaucracy.* Field staff and landowners are overwhelmed with paperwork and bureaucracy. Thirty-five percent of respondents indicated that contract paperwork was complicated, time-consuming and, in many cases, redundant.

- **Keep boots on the ground** and the staff who support those boots.
- Limit or eliminate paper files if security and privacy can be maintained. Provide electronic files and let the cooperator choose if he or she wants to print them.
- Electronic data sharing can save time for USDA and the client.
- Flexibility is important. Landowners, employees and partners feel results are more important than rigid standards.

*A physical office is beneficial to maintaining programs but is secondary as a financial priority.*

- The number one choice for landowners (28 percent) and partners (50 percent) is to establish regional offices with staff working part time from alternate work sites.
- The number one choice for employees (27 percent) is to have fewer offices with more staff.
- Offices should be strategically located to reduce travel time and centrally located for meeting and administrative activities.
- Regional offices can provide support staff such as agronomists, soil scientists, engineers, and administrative assistants.
- Mobile staff with communications technology is acceptable if there is a regional office.
- Vehicles fitted with office equipment for mobility are an acceptable option if the equipment is functional.
- Staff working part-time out of their homes to cut costs is an option but not preferred.

**Technology** – While 86 percent of farmers feel that NRCS currently has the information technology to move into the future, 57 percent of our employees have significant IT concerns. Top issues are listed below.

- Internet and cell service is not available everywhere and operates very slowly in rural areas.
- Agencies need to be on the same computer system to be effective.
- Backup systems and increased IT support are lacking.
- Younger customers are more likely to use computers, so NRCS needs to keep pace with the customer on IT services offered or required.

**Division of Staff Time** – NRCS field staff need to spend more time in the field. About 70 percent of field employees indicate they spend less than 25 percent of their time in the field because of administrative and contracting responsibilities. As a result, follow-up with landowners suffers. Most field employees think they should spend 55-85 percent of their time in the field.

**Suggestions for Cost Savings** – If budget cuts occur, they need to be across the agency, not just at the field level; we need boots on the ground. Other comments included:

- Individualize each office based on location, workload, census data, and cost effectiveness.
- Provide electronic files and allow electronic signatures if data can be protected.
- Consolidate and/or reduce the number of programs; keep those that provide the most “bang for the buck.”
- Establish a USDA kiosk in every county staffed by a knowledgeable local Ag agency person to report and update USDA records, enter technical service requests, and explain and take applications for programs.
- When making farm visits, assemble all decision makers at the site and prepare in advance to improve efficiency for technical service providers and the landowner.

**Technical Service Providers** – Producers are willing to pay small amounts for technical assistance. If cuts must be made to landowner services, customers prefer for NRCS to continue to provide conservation planning, soils and engineering; let the landowner pay TSPs to install and supervise installation of practices. Other concerns include:

- Uncoordinated service could lead to biases, different standards and lack of uniformity.
- An accreditation program is needed for non-government TSPs.